

## **Food industry tempts us to overeat, professor says**

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Marion Nestle met Peter Hall at summer camp in 1950. Fast-forward 52 years, and the two are still friends. Nestle is a professor and chairwoman of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University; Hall is a professor emeritus of sociology and educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Nestle traveled to Columbia last weekend to honor Hall at his retirement symposium. She spoke on the subject of "Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health," which is the title of her new book.

Nestle is most concerned about the escalating rate of obesity among children. She explained that obesity really boils down to a simple equation of calories consumed vs. calories expended. But she doesn't think activity levels have decreased enough over the past couple of decades to account for the rapid rise in weight. Sure, most of us would benefit from more physical activity and less television viewing, but Nestle believes overeating is the most likely cause of our national obesity problem.

Why are we overeating? Think about it. Food is available 24-7; it's everywhere, all the time. "When food is around you, it gets eaten," Nestle says. She links the abundance of food, our overconsumption and the resulting obesity directly to economics.

Nestle describes it this way: "American agriculture is enormously over-produced. Our over-efficient food industry must do everything possible to persuade people to eat more - more food, more often and in larger portions - no matter what it does to our waistlines or well-being."

Nestle reports that in 2000, the food industry generated close to \$900 billion in sales. Because the industry has shareholders to please, you can bet food companies successfully lobby government officials to keep national dietary guidelines watered down. Any attempts to recommend eating less are consistently fought by the powerful food industry.

Take a look at restaurant portion sizes; they're key in understanding our national obesity problem. Today, we eat close to half of our meals away from home. Starting in the 1970s, restaurant portion sizes began to grow - right along with our waistlines. "You can't even buy an 8-ounce serving of beverage anymore," Nestle notes.

The popular 64-ounce "Double Gulp" drink contains approximately 800 calories' worth of soda.

Nestle warns, "Marketers deliberately create ads that will slip below critical thinking." In other words, we buy soft drinks, sugared breakfast cereal and other junk foods because we've been sold on emotion, not logic.

"When children are asked to name their favorite food, most say pizza," Nestle says, "But when asked to name their favorite restaurant, they say McDonald's. That's the power of advertising."

McDonald's spent close to \$600 million on advertising in 1999. For comparison, the "5 A Day" program, designed by the National Cancer Institute to promote fruit and vegetable consumption as a way to reduce cancer risk, spent \$2 million. Even Altoid mints spent more - a whopping \$10 million in 1998.

Unfortunately, we have a growing population of unhealthy, overweight children. Nestle encourages us to work toward changing that picture. She believes it's essential that we help children understand that food advertisements try to get us to buy and eat more foods that might not be in our best interests.

School policy is key as well. For example, teachers and administrators might argue that soft-drink machines in schools provide much-needed revenue. But Nestle says having soft drinks in schools encourages even greater consumption. Soft drinks are clearly associated with tooth decay, loss of bone mass, poorer-quality diets and obesity.

"School food-service policies can only be changed," Nestle says, "with the combined support of committed parents, principals and school food-service directors."

Nestle and Hall recognize that good health has its roots in childhood. As it turns out, the two have been on the same path all these years. They've devoted their careers to critiquing the world in which we live and striving to make positive change for future generations.